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ABSTRACT

The School Program Addressing Non-attendance (SPAN) is an alternative program in Morton, Illinois, East High School addressing the needs of students removed from their regular classes for excessive absenteeism. Materials and activities used in the SPAN English program are both highly motivating and general enough to benefit students when they reenter the freshman or sophomore English sequence. To avoid repetition, literature is selected from works seldom read in the regular classroom. As there is little time to explore topics in depth, SPAN English emphasizes grammar, helps students identify and imitate five basic sentence patterns, and develops a basic vocabulary for discussing sentence construction. The program also requires that students write four or five multiple paragraph compositions during the 10-week term using the modes of persuasion, definition, or process. Reading activities involve developing strategies for reading textbooks and literature. In general, the program's important features are (1) limiting educational objectives to a manageable number, (2) stating the objectives clearly in language students can understand, (3) maintaining consistency with the regular English program, (4) coordinating reading and writing activities, and (5) providing students with frequent and positive feedback. (HOD)

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GENERIC ENGLISH: TEACHING ENGLISH IN AN ALTERNATIVE HIGH SCHOOL

by
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Cicero, Illinois
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Although this paper is entitled "Teaching English in an Alternative High School," I hope that it has some relevance for any English teacher, regardless of whether he/she teaches in an alternative school. I think that the methods I use can be described simply as sound practices in the teaching of English, and especially the teaching of English to a group of reluctant learners.

I have taught English in the alternative school of Morton East High School in Cicero, Illinois, for the last two years. The problem I faced was how to plan instruction in English for a group of students who are poorly motivated and who hate to be in school. I will discuss the selection of materials and the sequencing of activities. I will talk about instruction in grammar and writing, the study of literature, the coordination of reading and writing instruction, and the use of mastery learning strategies.

The alternative school at Morton East High School is called S.P.A.N., an acronym for "School Program Addressing Non-attendance." The program began five years ago to address the problem of growing absenteeism and dropout rate. The district has an attendance policy which permits a student to have fifteen unexcused absences before he/she is removed from a class with a failing grade. A student under sixteen who has been removed from his/her classes is placed in Study Halls all day. With a program which includes three or four Study Halls,

a student has little motivation to come to school. When a student goes to Juvenile Court for truancy, very often the judge will ask what support and what alternative the school is offering students who have great difficulty adjusting to the regular school program. The school district's administrators thought that they must offer some alternative to help fourteen and fifteen year old truants to reenter and remain in school. Students under sixteen who have been dropped from all their classes and placed in study halls are eligible for SPAN. The students, along with their parents, must meet with the program director, who reviews the policies and procedures governing the program. A student may participate in SPAN for one semester only. No student is allowed to participate in a second semester of SPAN. This alternative program is meant to help a student return to the regular program; it is not a permanent substitute. (Landi, 1982)

The SPAN classes meet after the regular school day, from 3:00 to 6:00 P.M. Classes meet Monday through Thursday. Each class is forty-five minutes long. There is no passing period; the teachers, not the students, move from class to class. The course offerings change slightly each year, but usually classes include English, math, developmental reading, social studies, and physical education. The social studies class and physical education meet twice a week. Class size remains small, usually with less than ten students per class.

Students are enrolled in SPAN after they have been removed

from their classes for excessive absenteeism. After seven or eight weeks of school, a large enough group of truants have been dropped from their regular classes to begin the SPAN classes. This means that the semester session for the alternative school is approximately ten weeks. The limited amount of time for instruction influences the selection and sequence of activities.

During one session of SPAN, a student asked me, "What English is this?" She wanted to know if she was in freshman or sophomore English. I told her that she was taking generic English. SPAN English is not designed for one specific grade level, nor does it dwell on one specific theme. Freshman and sophomore students are mixed together in the SPAN classes, and some sophomores are repeating freshman English at the time of their enrollement in SPAN. The selection of materials and activities must be generic -- that is, general enough to be of some benefit to any student who will reenter the regular freshman or sophomore English sequence.

The teacher of generic English must avoid duplicating the material that was used previous to or will be used after participation in SPAN. In selecting a novel, for example, one must look at the works available for freshman and sophomore classes and then survey the teachers to find the works that are seldom used. In the regular program, Of Mice and Men is used by only one teacher. The teacher uses the text in a higher track class, a class that would probably not have any of our

SPAN students. I have used Of Mice and Men in most of the SPAN classes. I have also used Oliver Twist with one SPAN class. The SPAN reading teacher shares with me the reading scores for all the SPAN students. In each class I review the reading test scores and determine the type of reading materials the students will be able to handle. Rarely are the students reading at approximately the same level. Usually the reading scores will vary widely. In selecting reading material I would rather use something that will be challenging for a few rather than satisfying for the lowest common denominator. Classes are small enough that one can provide individual attention for those students who are having difficulty reading. Most SPAN students can handle Of Mice and Men, at least on the literal level. Another SPAN English teacher has been successful in using a book entitled Night, which is seldom used in other freshman and sophomore classes. In making my selections--Of Mice and Men and Oliver Twist--I wanted novels that were consistent with the literature studied in the regular freshman and sophomore English classes. I also wanted to use literary works that asked if men have a responsibility for caring for their fellow human beings. I like books that celebrate human beings who have a compassion that allows them to put aside transitory wants in order to fulfill someone else's compelling need. The teaching of literature will be discussed in greater detail later in this paper.

In teaching grammar and composition, again little time is

available to explore topics in great depth. I spend very little time with grammar instruction. I have two purposes for teaching grammar in the SPAN classes: (1) to help students to identify and imitate five basic sentence patterns; (2) to develop a basic vocabulary for discussing sentence construction. In talking about sentence construction, I like the students to be able to write a clear base clause before sharpening an image with free modifiers. Once a week we work on a sentence combining exercise. The exercises rely on the use of free modifiers--participial phrases, apppositives, relative clauses, absolutes phrases, adjective phrases, prepositional phrases, and comparisons. The sentence combining exercises are structured around the principles of generative rhetoric described by Francis Christensen. In addition to the sentence combining, students engage in sentence notation, a method of diagramming sentences to delineate the relationships among the base clause and its modifiers.

The sentence combining exercises are a valuable activity for the type of student we have in the SPAN program. Students are able to expand their syntactic repertoires through a series of highly structured syntactic manipulations. This kind of activity is relatively simple, and there is a high degree of success. The students have a sense of ownership about the sentences that they produce. These exercises provide an opportunity for students to receive positive feedback and to feel proud of their academic achievement.

My SPAN students write four or five multiple-paragraph compositions during the ten-week term. I concentrate on the following writing modes: definition, persuasion, and process. I spend a good deal of time on pre-writing activities. I try to help students to develop a data base of related ideas and to outline a form for the particular writing task. To write an extended defintion, I use some ideas developed by Hillocks (1975) and by Johannessen, Kahn, and Walter (1982). One assignment requires students to provide an extended definition of friendship. To begin the activity, I provide the students with a series of scenes that could be considered demonstrations of friendship. Actually, the handout contains examples, near examples, and contrasting examples of friendship. In groups of three or four, the students examine each example and determine whether or not this is an illustration of friendship. Through their discussion, students develop the criteria by which they determine what is friendship. Each group has a discussion leader and a recorder. After some time for group discussion, the class reassembles and the recorders share the groups' conclusions with the entire class. After the criteria are listed on the board, we develop a form for writing about the topic. For each criterion, the writer provides support in the form of an example. Each example must be accompanied by an explanation of how the example supports the assertion made in that paragraph.

Students are also asked to write a persuasive essay. This

essay is a response to a problematic situation found in literature. I provide the students a plot summary of a lengthy work of imaginative literature. The summary presents a difficult choice for a character. After reading the stories, the students ask questions to clarify the situation. When they are clear about the details of the story, they arrange themselves into groups to discuss the problem and to propose some action to be taken. We reassemble to share ideas and to develop a model for discussing the problem. I have used the following plot summaries: Hamlet ("Conrad, Prince of Denmark"), Measure for Measure ("Vice in Vienna"), and Billy Budd ("Billy Bottone").

I also have students complete a process essay. We practice describing a process by writing instructions for reproducing a set of geometric figures that I provide. Students work in pairs to develop the instructions. Each pair is assigned a different geometric figure. After one group has developed its set of instructions, a student from another group listens to the instructions and attempts to reproduce the figure on the chalkboard. If the instructions are not clear, it is obvious to the entire class. This activity encourages students to be precise and to have some sympathy for their audience. After this prewriting activity, students are asked to write a process essay on a subject of their own choice.

Because there is precious little time to work with the SPAN students, I try whenever possible to coordinate reading

and writing activities so that one activity facilitates the other. I will discuss an example of this effort later in my discussion.

Because SPAN students are also enrolled in a reading class, I devote proportionately less time to reading and literature than I would ordinarily. The reading activities involve the development of some simple strategies for reading textbooks and imaginative literature. We read three short stories in preparation for reading a novel. We practice some techniques of previewing and questioning. I encourage students to take extra time to read the beginning of a work very carefully. By concentrating on the first page of the story, we can recognize the narrative point of view, the setting, the style and tone, and sometimes the important characters. I make it a practice to read the beginning of a work aloud to the students to gain interest and to increase their awareness of the important elements in the work. When we are reading a novel, I will ask students to summarize the part of the book that we read the previous days and to recall any salient conclusions we stated about the narrative. I encourage the students to guess what will happen later in the story, and I force them to provide a rationale for their projections.

I would like to provide one obvious example of how I try to coordinate reading and writing activities. Before we begin reading Of Mice and Men, I require students to write a persuasive essay. I begin the assignement by telling students

about an old dog named Buster who was a member of my family throughout my childhood. I describe Buster in great detail and allow students to ask questions about him. I expect students to take notes at this time. Buster's story goes like this: when I was fifteen years old, Buster was also fifteen. He was in the family for as long as I could remember, and he had become very old and decrepit. He smelled bad, and the awful stench of his coat began to befoul the entire house. Poor Buster was also quite deaf and nearly blind. He had lost most of his teeth, and he could only eat the softest foods. He apparently had arthritis, and he had great difficulty moving around. Buster spent most of the day lying near the stove in our kitchen. My family complained that Buster was smelling up the house so much that they were embarassed to invite company to our home. They explained that Buster was so sick and decrepit that he was no use to himself, and he was better off dead. My family claimed that I was not doing Buster any favors by keeping him alive.

After hearing this story and asking questions, the SPAN students are asked to write an essay in which they try to convince me to have my dog put to sleep. No matter how they actually feel about this issue, they are to take the position that I should have my dog put to sleep.

Together we develop a model for the persuasive essay. I take a "stock issues" approach to teaching persuasion. First we discuss the different types of propositions, and I ask the

students to frame a proposition of policy regarding the action to be taken with my dog Buster. The students write their compositions in the form of a letter to me. When the student begins the composition, he must provide a brief, general background for discussing the problem. The student states his proposition and defines any key terms. The argument develops along the following lines: first, what are the problems that need to be solved? (HARMS) Second, how serious are these problems? (SIGNIFICANCE) Finally, is the killing of the dog the only way to correct the problems that we have identified? (INHERENCY) This last question requires a great deal of awareness of the writer's audience.

The assignment prepares us for thinking about some of the issues in Of Mice and Men. If you recall, that novel featured a character named Candy, who owned an old dog that was smelling up the bunkhouse. Carlson, another character in the novel, encouraged Candy to put the dog to sleep. Candy must determine whether it is more compassionate to let the dog live or to put it to sleep. Candy allows Carlson to shoot the dog, and Candy acknowledges that he should have killed the dog himself. This episode of the novel prepares us to think about George's dilemma, and the writing assignment about Buster helps students to understand Candy's problem. After reading and discussing Of Mice and Men, the students are asked to write an essay about the novel. After writing the persuasive essay about Buster, and after relating that problem to the major issues of the

novel, the students are able to write intelligently about George and Lennie. The Buster essay is one obvious example of how one activity supports another. There are other more subtle examples. When there is a very limited amount of time to work with the students, it becomes important to coordinate reading and writing activities whenever possible.

In all instructional activities I try to use mastery learning strategies. I limit the number of major objectives to five. These I dictate to the students and have them record the objectives in their notes. At the end of the term we consult these objectives to determine our degree of success. For each lesson I tell the students the objectives in language that they can understand. I also make certain that the students know what activities and assignments they will be responsible for. Most activities will be completed within the forty-five minute period. There is little homework in SPAN. I provide students with frequent feedback, and I take every opportunity to praise students for their efforts. By making assignments that can be completed within one class period, I have an opportunity to evaluate the lesson and offer feedback each day. When a student has not reached the mastery level for a particular objective, he continues to work on that objective. Whenever possible I vary the mode of instruction to address the same objective. I spend very little time lecturing or presenting. Students often work in groups or at the board and receive peer evaluation. For composition assignments we follow the cyclical

process of prewriting, writing, feedback, and revision.

There are a number of elements in the SPAN program that support the English component directly or indirectly. The entire staff makes a concerted effort to help the students feel good about being in school. In our own small way we imitate the activities of the regular school program. Each semester one of the work-study coordinators gives a presentation, which helps students to set goals and begin thinking about careers. In the spring we have a softball game involving the students and the staff. As a group we acknowledge students' birthdays. We produce a modest yearbook with student contributions. At the end of each term we have a graduation ceremony featuring the president of the school board and the principal, who encourage and admonish the students before handing out letters of successful completion and certificates for perfect attendance.

The important features of the English program in the alternative school are the following: limiting the objectives to a manageable number of major objectives, stating objectives in language that the students can understand, remaining generally consistent with the regular English program, coordinating reading and writing activities, providing students with frequent feedback, and taking every opportunity to praise the student's efforts.

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